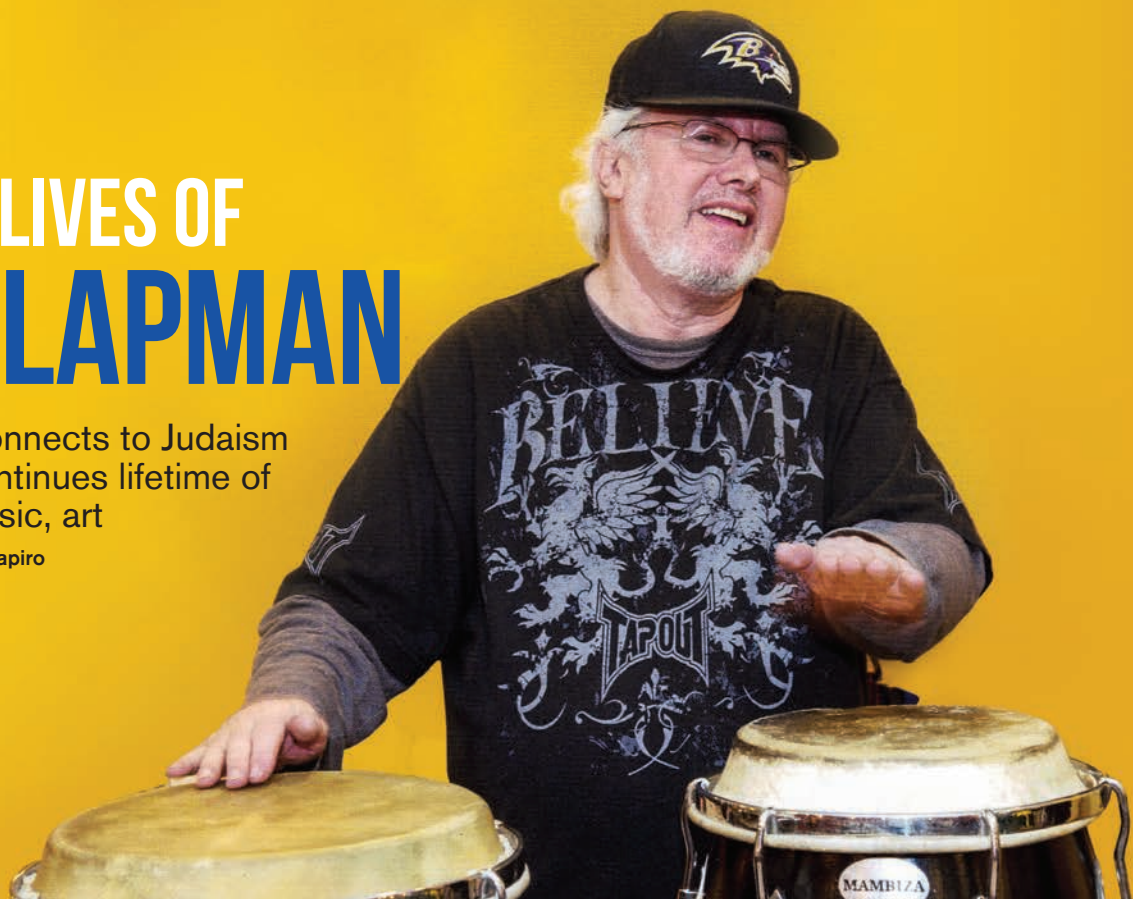


# THE MANY LIVES OF ARNOLD CLAPMAN

Renaissance man reconnects to Judaism  
in Baltimore as he continues lifetime of  
making music, art

By Marc Shapiro



**FIVE YEARS AGO**, Arnold David Clapman came to Baltimore, as he said, with his tail between his legs. His marriage had ended, as did his many art classes — which during his 25 years in California included teaching at-risk youth and incarcerated men — when funding dried up. California just didn't feel like home anymore.

He hadn't lived in Baltimore since 1962, when he left upon graduating from the Maryland Institute College of Art to head to the cultural epicenter of Greenwich Village in New York City. No longer feeling the warmth of the Northern California sun, and with some encouragement from his Baltimorean sister, Arnie Clapman packed up to start over again, like he had done many times before.

"Five years out, it's a whole new chapter," he said. "A whole new door opened. I was just treading water when I first came here."

Clapman, 75, whose life has been a whirlwind of making art and playing music, now finds himself playing congas — his longtime instrument — with a variety of musicians in Baltimore's Orthodox Jewish community, and the music has connected him to Judaism in a way he had only previously dreamed of. And as a resident of the Weinberg House on Old Court Road, Clapman screens movies for the residents three nights a week, provides monthly cartoons in the newsletter and even fixes his neighbors' TVs and remote controls.

"I'm the punk kid on the block," he joked. Clapman even has a girlfriend. "I could be a millionaire, but I

don't think I could be richer. I have everything. What I have money can't buy."

Clapman's reconnecting to Judaism through music is essential to being Jewish, said Guitars of Pikesville owner Joshua Polak.

"Music is at the core foundation of Judaism ... That's the spark that ignites when everything of consequence takes place," he said, referring to biblical stories such as when Miriam led the Israelites in song after crossing the Red Sea, as well as modern customs. "It's at the core of who we are. I'm not just talking about music, I'm talking about any sort of artistic expression where all artists find ourselves."

A look around Clapman's two-room apartment shows that his life has been anything but ordinary. There are photos of him with famed folk singer Richie Havens, the first performer at Woodstock with whom Clapman had an artistic, musical and business relationship, and of Muhammad Ali signing a painting Clapman made for him; Clapman illustrated a children's book for Ali and sketched him for DC Comics. There's at least a dozen swords on display — replicas from "Kill Bill," "Lord of the Rings," "Gladiator," "Braveheart" and "Excalibur" — die-cast fighter planes and at least seven congas in plain sight, with his two stage congas set up and another propped up with a tuning wrench sitting on top of it.

An easel sits across from his desk in his art and music room. Inside the closet, along with congas, are printouts of his demon paintings, based on "The

Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage," considered an important book in occult history.

"They're not really idols, I don't worship them," he quipped.

The artifacts help tell Clapman's story, from his time playing music and drawing portraits in Greenwich Village — where he played with *everyone* before they got famous — to Boston, where he had three children and joined a jazz-fusion band that would later get a record deal and take him back to New York, then to California, where he would teach art to those who may have needed a creative outlet the most.

## BALTIMORE BEGINNINGS

Arnie Clapman was born in Brooklyn, but moved to Baltimore when he was 2 years old, which is how young he was when he first exhibited his artistic abilities. His parents used to draw him pictures, his father in pencil when Clapman was learning to talk and his mother on a slate chalkboard to entertain him. She drew a bird one day, left the room, and when she came back, there were two birds.

"So, I don't know whether I was a born artist or a born forger," Clapman said. Drawing occupied his free time at home, where he spent his evenings after school taking care of his young twin sisters along with his other sister, Nannette, who is two years younger than Clapman. Both of his parents worked. "I liked just drawing stuff, but it didn't really take off for me until I was old enough to read the Sunday funny papers. That was my first

exposure to art that I wanted to be able to do.”

Comics like “Prince Valiant,” “Flash Gordon,” “Dick Tracy” and “Tarzan” piqued his interest, as did animals, dinosaurs and monster movies.

“We lived in a very small house. ... My brother would make these animals, life-sized animals out of cardboard like a jaguar and various snake things, and my sisters, if they had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, these things would be sitting there and scare the hell out of them,” Clapman’s sister, Nannette Blinichoff, recalled.

As a student at the Talmudical Academy, Clapman wanted to be able to draw comic book versions of biblical stories as well. As he went on to high school at Baltimore City College, he was emulating the comic-book artists he idolized and working with pen and pencil. But after winning a nationwide patriotic poster contest with his design of a kid saluting a flag, his mother, Terri, hired a local artist to give him lessons, which opened his world to other mediums such as charcoal and watercolor paints.

“I wanted to master them,” Clapman said.

She also got him enrolled in adult art classes at MICA while he was still in high school, and the quality of his work landed him a four-year scholarship at the school.

At the same time, his mother, who Clapman said “what she lacked in funds she made up for in contacts,” got him a job on The Block playing congas at the Rainbow Lounge. It would lead to the other gigs, including drumming for exotic dancers, which helped Clapman pay for books and art supplies.

“At night I had a different life. During the day I was studying art and falling asleep a lot because I was working all night,” he said.

A friend who acted as his agent got him a gig with pioneering bebop jazz drummer Max Roach, who would ultimately inspire Clapman to head to New York after college. While playing the song “Caravan” at a gig at a black club called Estelle’s on North Avenue, Clapman’s hands started bleeding a bit from playing the up-tempo tune.

“I went into the men’s room and while I was bandaging it up — because I was embarrassed, I didn’t want anyone to see — Max followed me into the men’s room, and he said, ‘You’re really good, kid, but you’re never gonna find out how good you are staying here in Baltimore, you gotta go to New York,’” Clapman said. And he listened, taking off for Greenwich Village in 1962, when “everything was just starting,” and got himself a storefront apartment with oriel windows on West 16th Street off 6th Avenue.



From top: Arnie Clapman teaches adult art classes at Monterey Peninsula College in California in the early 1990s; sketches an elephant at The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore at age 13; poses with his award-winning poster in high school; and a page from “The Goblin King,” part of the first “Comix by Kidz” created by Clapman’s students.

## THE ‘ELECTRIC’ VILLAGE

“It was like going into Never Neverland, like wonderland, it was just magical,” Clapman said. “You could sense that something really big was getting ready to happen there. It was all about entertainment and music and just the arts, and I just walked into it; it was amazing. I don’t think I got home for almost a week. I slept at a different place every night.”

He would become house percussionist at Café Bizarre, where he would back countless acts including calypso bands, Havens, The Smothers Brothers and The Ronettes, the latter of which he’d accompany to Harlem, where famed record producer Phil Spector taught the ladies their future hit “Be My Baby.”

As he was playing music and making his own art, he was drawing portraits to make extra money. It was at a portrait studio one night where he met Havens, the famed folk singer who would give the opening performance at Woodstock in 1969 and pen the anthem “Freedom.” Havens also drew portraits to make extra money.

“Before that, I didn’t talk to him. I used to watch him play, he was magic. I used to drop everything just to watch him play at the Bizarre,” Clapman said. “So did everybody else; the waitresses, waiters, the whole place would stop. Richie would start singing and everything would stop. He was just hypnotic. It was like nothing else that anybody had ever heard.”

The two struck up a friendship, and Clapman performed with Havens all over the Village, meeting greats such as Bob Dylan. He even shared the stage with icons Carlos Santana and Thelonus Monk.

“The air was like electric,” he said of the Village. “It was like the center of the world.”

But he only stayed a few years. Clapman married actress



### SEE ARNIE CLAPMAN PERFORM

as a featured guest Sunday, June 21 at Guitars of Pikesville, 806 Reisterstown Road, Suite 6, Pikesville. Music starts at 6 p.m. Visit [guitarsofpikesville.com](http://guitarsofpikesville.com) or call 410-415-5400.



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From top: Clapman teaches comic book art to at-risk youth in Santa Cruz, Calif., in the early 2000s; he poses with Abraham Finkelstein's children in the sukkah he painted in 2013; "Horseman," a painting circa 1989-1990; and a sketch of Muhammad Ali from 1982 that was drawn for a children's book that never came out.



and dancer Nancy Hall and moved up to Cambridge, Mass., with her in the mid-'60s. The couple would have three children.

In Boston, Clapman took his art skills to Harvard University, where he drew dinosaurs and plants for gift shops and scientists and performed fossil restorations, a dream-come-true for some who drew dinosaurs as a kid. When archeologist Louis Leakey found the "ape-man" skull, believed to be an ancient relative of humans, Clapman was the first to draw it in America, he said.

"All this crazy stuff happened to me," he said. "It's being in the right places at the right time."

All this time, Clapman continued playing music and making art on his own terms. He earned himself a reputation for being a good funk player, which landed him local gigs as well as musical run-ins with Miles Davis, around the time of his "On the Corner" album, and The Staples Singers.

"To this day, my daughter Madeleine [Hall] is a blues singer I think because Mavis [Staples] held her in her arms when she was a baby," Clapman said. "The music came from somewhere."

Hall remembers the kind of music her dad was playing back in those days.

"It was very experimental avant-garde jazz," she said. "I remember thinking, 'What's going on?' I don't know that I recognized it as music at the time. But it was cool having people around playing instruments."

Clapman was recruited for super-band Baird Hersey & The Year of the Ear, which he described as an 11-piece band

with a huge horn section and three drummers playing "avant-garde jazz rock." It would take Clapman back to New York, where the band cut three albums under a contract with Arista Novus Records, and he reconnected with Havens.

## CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

Clapman and Havens, along with the folk singer's long-time manager, Marcia Wolfson, formed ARM Productions (for Arnold, Richie and Marcia), which entailed Clapman working on art and music with Havens.

During this same period, Clapman created comic-book art for *Heavy Metal* magazine and art projects for Muhammad Ali and Cheech Marin of Cheech and Chong.

ARM Productions would take Clapman to California, where he and Havens hoped to get in early on special-effects technology. They used top technology and a created a demo reel showing their colorization and film restoration skills using "King Kong." Although Hollywood studios were interested, the project never came to fruition after millions of dollars in startup funds fell through.

With seven years of work down the tubes, Clapman decided to stay in California and met a woman who took him up to Santa Cruz, which he called "the most beautiful place I'd ever been."

"I'd never been any place like that. I was a city boy," he said. "The surfing capital of the world and redwoods and mountains and nature like I'd never seen. Big Sur, Monterey, unbelievable."

Clapman started teaching adult art education: caricatures, cartooning, portraits, illustrations and watercolors. But he wasn't making enough money, and his lifestyle caught up to him.

"I had hit a bottom. In 1991, it all kind of crashed. I was homeless and wanted to stop, couldn't stop," he said, referring to drinking and drugging. Although a car accident nearly killed him, it wasn't until he was threatened with jail time that he decided to get clean.

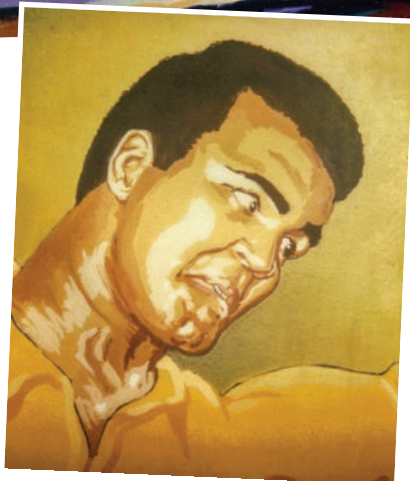
"The problem all my life was that drinks were always on the house wherever I went, and the drugs were pretty much free, particularly when I was well known. I had dealers following me around," he said. Even in California, where he was lesser known, "it was still there, all around me."

He got sober, and through his recovery groups met a woman he would marry and a guy who became his best friend and bandmate, Joey Bryning, with whom he would form "sober band" Crazy Heart.

In the mid-'90s Clapman started working as an overnight counselor at a group home for troubled juveniles, "mostly gang kids," he said. While on the job, he would work on freelance art projects.

"My wife would give me a pot of black coffee ... so I could stay awake all night, and I would do illustrations," he said. "Kids started sneaking out of bed to watch me."

Word spread to the kids' counselors and then to their



schools, and in no time Clapman was teaching more at-risk youth from Santa Cruz to the barrios to juvenile hall, where he was affectionately known as “Arnie the Art Guy.”

He opened his own nonprofit art school, and with the work of these kids and other teens, he published “Comix by Kids,” a diverse series of comics still very dear to his heart. Two of the kids from barrios even landed scholarships at prestigious art institutes because of their work.

“I get goose bumps just thinking about it,” he said. “I never saw that coming. ... California turned into an amazing trip for me, that’s why I stayed there for 25 years.”

But Clapman’s California honeymoon came to an end. Funding for his teaching dried up, his marriage of 17 years ended, and his age was preventing him from running around the way he used to.

“Everywhere I looked were things I can’t do anymore,” he said. “It was like rubbing my old age in my face.”

He moved back to Baltimore feeling like a failure for having left California under those circumstances.

“I thought it was all over for me here,” he said. But the ever-adaptable Clapman soon made a new, rich life for himself.

## A REBIRTH IN BALTIMORE

Blinchikoff, Clapman’s sister, reintroduced him to Baltimore and helped him get into the Weinberg House. Through a Chasidic rabbi, the son of one of the building’s residents, Clapman wound up playing with Israeli folk singer Oneg Shemesh at Congregation Tiferes Yisroel on a whim.

“We rocked the place,” Clapman said. “On the strength of that I got noticed by the Chasidic community and even though I have an earring, even though I wasn’t one of them, they took me in.”

He’s become a regular at Guitars of Pikesville, where he performs Sunday, and got a gig with the “Rockin’ Rabbi,” Avraham Rosenblum, known for his work with the Diaspora Yeshiva Band, playing with new band The Brisket Brothers.

“He’s one of those people you instantly fall in love with,” Rosenblum said. “He’s a very big-hearted individual, he’s a got a great sense of humanity.”

Added Rosenblum: “He’s a great conga player. He’s a total natural. It’s in his bones. It’s in his blood.”

Clapman, who has since purchased a “beautiful” talis, said he has everything he ever wanted now.

“What I wanted more than anything that I could never have was the joy, the joyous part of the religion. To be with people that love God so much it just comes bursting out,” he said, “Like Simchas Torah, I’m up on the bimah and I’m playing and the Torahs are dancing around me or I go to a Shabbaton over at Pearlstone and I’m playing congas and I’m soloing and all the rabbis are dancing in a circle. For a Jewish kid this is big stuff.”

Like Clapman, Polak reconnected with his own Judaism later in life.

“It’s something that never leaves you. I think it’s something



From top: Clapman plays congas with The Brisket Brothers; smiles with Richie Havens before performing in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in 1989; “Garbo and Gilbert,” created for a specialty greeting card circa 1979-1980; and “Chief Thunder Hawk,” a lithograph of the Sioux chief circa 1986.



you find truth in when you’re allowed to,” he said. “We find that when we’re allowed to experience Torah ... when it’s not coercion and when it’s more a time of exploration, that’s when you get Torah and that’s what happened to him.”

Rivka Malka Perlman, a member of Tiferes Yisroel who first met Clapman at the Oneg Shemesh concert, said the Orthodox community is very accepting of Clapman in contrast to the Judaism he grew up with.

“[Back then] there was a strong sense of judgment and harshness: ‘You do it like this or you don’t do it at all.’ A very punitive kind of Judaism and judgmental,” she said. “I know in Baltimore, there’s a tremendous amount of diversity and acceptance. In the Orthodox community, the more cultural the better.” She’s seen people perk up when Clapman is introduced to them as a cartoonist or as someone who worked with at-risk gang kids.

Hall, who is 49 and lives in the Boston area, said she’s seen a lot of personal and spiritual growth in her father.

“He didn’t get the kind of recognition that other artists did. I know that at one point it was a big deal to him,” she said. “I think he’s in a different place now, a spiritual place. I think his priorities changed.”

Clapman, who is working on illustrations for a series of short stories written by his grandfather and namesake, Aaron David Schwartz, is now happy and comfortable in his Pikesville apartment, surrounded by mementos of his storybook life.

“These are fleeting moments and that’s why I like to surround myself with all this stuff, surround myself with my life,” he said. “It’s a whirlwind. It would make a great movie.”

